

and depicts more multicultural and diverse experiences than the original collection. The second generation of *Dropped Threads* contributors could look to the first stories, gain confidence in writing about experiences they hadn't previously felt comfortable sharing, and fill in what was missing from the original collection.

Dropped Threads 2 is slightly longer than the original, with an organised table of contents divided into four chapters: "End Notes," "Variations," "Glimpses," and "Nourishment." Each of these categories is a loose grouping of about nine stories, on a similar theme. The insights come from the experiences of each author, but many of the stories have strong political overtones. "End Notes" deals with feminist topics such as rape, brutality against women, child abuse, and attempted suicide. "Variations" focuses on several challenges for women, including widowhood, psychiatric illness, breast cancer, and single motherhood. "Glimpses" shares musings and private thoughts that have shaped the authors as adult women writers. "Nourishment," as its title indicates, explores motherhood and the friendships between women here in North America as well as in third world countries. The final story in the last chapter, "Speaking of Dying" by Shelagh Rogers, is a poignant tribute to its subject, Kate Carmichael, and posthumously to Carol Shields herself.

The writing by all the contributors in *Dropped Threads 2* is honest and eloquent. The book includes several well-known Canadian authors such as Jane Urquhart, Sandra Martin, and Michele Landsberg. It is hard to forget the horrific description of child rape and the victim's emotions in Pamela Mala Sinha's "Hiding" or the anguish of being unable to conceive a child, in Lisa Majeau Gordon's "An Exercise in Fertility."

There is also humour in this anthology. For In "Ten Beauty Tips You Never Asked

For," Elizabeth Hay discusses skin creams and lotions before lamenting that nothing really works to stop the process of decay. In C.J. Papoutsis' "They Didn't Come With Instructions," the author's self-deprecating wit nudges us to think of examples of our own trials in child raising.

In her thoughtful foreword, Adrienne Clarkson explains the power of these individual "vignettes": "Perhaps that is what women's lives are really like—snowflakes with infinitely different patterns, complete in themselves." I did not discover these "snowflakes," however, by reading the collection chronologically. I explored essays from one chapter and then moved on to another section, often returning to reread a story with a new awareness a second or third time. Readers of *Dropped Threads 2* will be amazed to partake in such illuminating conversations with complete strangers.

Satire, Sex, and Smith

Russell Smith

Muriella Pent. Doubleday Canada \$29.95

Reviewed by Greg Doran

Forget what you think you know about Russell Smith. Smith is known for his acute social observations and sartorial advice in *The Globe and Mail*, as well as for two well-received novels, *How Insensitive* and *Noise*, and a strong collection of stories, *Young Men*. However, *Muriella Pent* is a mature novel that marks his arrival as an accomplished novelist. His earlier fiction only hinted at this complex, multi-voiced narrative work. As opposed to his previous "insider" novels, *Muriella Pent* is immediately more accessible to a larger audience. You do not have to have gone "club-hopping" with Russell Smith to understand the satiric focus of this latest work.

The most marked difference between *Muriella Pent* and his earlier work is the

absence of the "Smithsonian" hero. The over-educated, hip, cultured hero of his earlier fiction is absent from *Muriella Pent*. In his place, Smith has created a cast of rich, diverse characters. Foremost in the cast of characters is the novel's heroine, Muriella Pent, a wealthy widow coming out of the shadow of her late husband. The novel follows her development from a stereotypical society wife passively supporting the arts to a strong critic of and advocate for the arts. The pivotal moment in her journey is the arrival of the novel's other central character, Marcus Royston. Royston appears to be very loosely modeled on Derek Walcott, and through him Smith unleashes his satire. Smith's central satiric target is the role of "political-correctness" in the artistic community and its stifling effect on creativity.

Anyone familiar with Smith's columns will know that he is well versed in the language of the artistic world, and he uses this knowledge to present a keen satire. Royston is brought to Toronto, Smith's urban muse, as part of a writer-in-residence program. Despite his recent creative inactivity, Royston is considered the perfect candidate by the ironically titled Arts Action Committee. In its attempt to bring in the politically correct candidate, the committee unleashes a drunken, bitter figure into the unsuspecting Toronto cultural community. Smith uses Royston, as an outsider, to comment on the absurdities of various cultural policies, such as the mandate of the local arts community to create art "for divorced ladies' condos."

Smith skewers the artistic, cultural, and academic communities of Canada in the novel. He even takes aim at his own position as a member of the "Torontocentrism that's just so commercial and so dominates the publishing world." No target is safe from Smith's piercing gaze. *Muriella Pent* is a work of exceptional humour, sex and satire. It marks the fulfillment of the promise Smith showed with his earlier work.

An Uneven Rhetorical Flourish

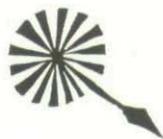
Heather Spears

The Flourish. Ekstasis Editions \$22.95

Reviewed by Tracy Wyman-Marchand

The Flourish is the product of Heather Spears' raid on nineteenth-century Scottish police files, and the effort to re-member the last two years of her murdered great-aunt's life. "Flourish" has multiple meanings in Spears' narrative lexicon: botanical, musical, and rhetorical; but mostly, it is metonymic of a promising life cut short by violence. As a project of recovery, *The Flourish* is intriguing. However, the novel, written from the templates of nineteenth-century domestic and sensation fiction, is often overburdened by Victorian clichés. Further, any sense of immediacy that Spears tries to establish is interrupted by her awkward grammatical manoeuvres.

In her introduction, Spears tells readers that events in *The Flourish* are true and moreover that she is "necessarily convinced that the parts [she has] imagined are true as well." Yet it is always risky business when an author confuses truth and imaginative licence in the same breath. Add to this Spears' suturing of original text—denoted by italics—and the result is a less than seamless narrative, a confusing prospect given that Spears takes such great pains to stake out her claim to authenticity. In any event, *The Flourish* is much too self-consciously constructed a novel to effectively sustain a desired reality effect.



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